A MEA CULPA FOR THE FELIX CULPA?

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One of the most promising defenses theists in general have against the problems of evil and hell is the free will defense. This defense, however, requires assuming an incompatibilist conception of free will. For those who have either doubts about this free will response or wish to hold to a compatibilist view of free will, however, exploring further defensive options is desirable. Elaborating on an old theme, I will defend a version of the greater-goods defense and offer it as a defensible, though controversial, alternative to the free will defense. Like all greater-goods views, this one relies on explaining the existence of evil in terms of the greater goods that come out of it. Among these goods are the greater goods of Incarnation and Atonement, their respective goodness consisting in large part in the higher-order divine good of glorifying God through the display of divine virtue.

Given a Libertarian[1] view of free will, the free will defense[2] seems to be a likely candidate for successfully defusing the problem of evil. The basic strategy involved in this defense would be to claim that God could not guarantee an evil-free world unless he refrained from creating free, morally-responsible, rational creatures. However, without the assumption of Libertarian freedom – or at least its possibility – the free will defense does not seem able to get off the ground. After all, if compatibilism were true then it would seem that God could actually

[1] Libertarian views of free will take it that causal determinism is incompatible with free will (that is, they are *incompatibilist*) and that we do in fact have this incompatibilist kind of freedom.

[2] In the literature, there has tended to be a strict distinction between what are called *theodicies*, which try to justify God's permission of evil in terms of what are supposedly his actual reasons for doing so, and *defenses*, which merely try to show that God's existence is compatible with the existence of evil by coming up with possible reasons that would justify God's permission. For my purposes here, I will use 'theodicy', 'defense', and 'response' pretty much interchangeably and will not make any distinction between the categories.

guarantee an evil-free world full of free creatures just by making sure that the initial conditions and laws of nature were such as to guarantee that no sin or evil actually ever arises.

In addition, if there is no Libertarian free will, then the free will defense may not be the only response to the problem of evil to suffer because of it. It seems to me that soul-making views (according to which evil and suffering are required for growth into moral or spiritual maturity) themselves may, if they are to be plausible, need to rest on a foundation of Libertarian freedom. Otherwise, it may be hard to see why God could not simply create each of us already in full maturity and in complete sinless perfection. Whatever the case may be on this issue, however, I will simply leave soul-making views mostly to the side for the purposes of the rest of this paper.

A large number of Christian theists, of course, *do* in fact believe in Libertarian freedom and, hence, such thinkers often find the free will defense to be fairly convincing as a response to the problems raised by suffering and evil. In the minds of such believers, it may seem that all we really need to do is to defend Libertarian freedom and the free will defense which relies upon it in order to do a good job of defending theism or the Christian faith against the attack from evil. However, many Christians and other theists are *not* in fact Libertarians and many explicitly *reject* incompatibilist views of freedom. For these latter folks, there will be a very genuine interest in developing a response to the problem that does not rely on a kind of freedom that they would question or sometimes even reject. For these folks, there is a very genuine need to develop an alternative response.

But it is not simply the anti-Libertarian theist who ought to have an interest in the development of a theodicy which does not presuppose Libertarianism. The Libertarian committed to the free will defense ought to be interested in such a project as well. For one thing, we could be wrong about free will – perhaps compatibilism is true. It would be nice if we had a

backup plan – a kind of defensive fall-back position or Plan B – just in case the whole Libertarianism thing simply does not work out in the end. In addition, it could help win others to theism or at least help them to think it just a little less implausible than they did previously. If I am having a discussion with a die-hard compatibilist and I want to try to convince them to become a theist, asking them to first swallow Libertarianism may be too big a pill for them to take. Better, instead, to find something better suited to their condition – that is, a reply to the problem of evil which a compatibilist can consistently accept. Lastly, developing a Libertarianism-free response may be a good idea in the unlikely event that, despite the truth of Libertarianism, the free will defense still cannot quite cut it in defeating the problem of evil.

So given that we ought to be interested in developing a response to the problem of evil which is consistent with compatibilism, what are our available options? Not the free will defense, for obvious reasons, and I have already explicitly set soul-making views aside. For the sake of this paper, I will also set aside so-called 'skeptical theist' responses to the problem and consider only those responses which try to show the actual or possible reasons which might justify God's permission of evil. To remain as orthodox as possible, let us also set aside any views which require that we make God less than perfectly good, knowledgeable or powerful, as well as any sort of view which claims that good can only exist if there is some evil for it to stand in contrast with.

The option I would propose instead is a kind of greater-good defense against the problem of evil. Not every version of a greater-good defense is going to work, of course, so the success of such a defense will depend on the details, including crucially the precise goods we take to be great enough to justify allowing all of the world's evil. As our springboard into developing a better greater-good defense, I want to take a look at some remarks of Mackie's on greater-good responses to evil. With J. L. Mackie (1955), let us call evils such as pain and suffering, which do not necessarily metaphysically require the presence of other evils for their existence, *first order*

evils. Similarly, call goods such as pleasure which also do not require any evils, *first order goods*. Mackie suggests that a theist might respond to the problem of evil by insisting that the existence of first order evil is justified because it is necessary for the existence of the more valuable *second order goods*. Here, second order goods could be things like acts of courage or sacrifice – exercises of certain important virtues which cannot exist in the absence of any evils. Without threat of danger or without real cost, for instance, there could be no genuine acts of courage or sacrifice – evil is a logical precondition for anything to count as falling into the category of such goods. However, Mackie thinks that there are also *second order evils* which are *not* required for the existence of genuine second order goods. These would be things like hatred or cruelty, which the world could do entirely without and yet still contain plenty in the way of acts of courage or sacrifice. Following Stewart (1993, 15-16), it is possible to respond at this point that some human actions, such as forgiveness, are *third order goods* which *do* in fact require second order evils. However, Mackie (1955, 207-208) takes it that no matter how high we go up, third order or even higher, there will always be an evil at the same order which will not be justified *at that order*. If we then try to move up an order to some higher good which requires this evil, we will just have pushed the problem up a level once again and we are off on an infinite regress.

Now, I think there may in fact be room to dispute Mackie on his infinite regress claim, even if we concern ourselves solely with human moral goods. However, I think Mackie's discussion can help point us in a more promising direction – if we focus on human goods, we may end up explaining quite a lot of the evil that exists in the world, but there may still remain some evil left-over that no purely human good can cover. Rather than look at *human* goods involving *human* manifestations or displays of various virtues, I suggest that we look to *divine* goods – that is, *divine* manifestations or displays of various virtues. It is not implausible, after all, to think that *divine* displays of *divine* virtue are much – if not infinitely – more valuable than

otherwise similar human displays of the same or similar virtues. And, of course, many of these displays will require the existence of evil in the world. More importantly, unlike higher order human goods, there will be no corresponding evil of the same order left out of this sort of defense. After all, it is a basic tenet of classic theism that there simply *are no* divine evils to take into account. God is wholly good, after all. So perhaps here we have a place to stop Mackie's vicious regress and explain those evils that could not be sufficiently explained by the higher order human goods.

What we have here now are the makings of a potentially successful greater-goods defense, whereby we can justify the existence of lower order evils via the higher order, moral goods whose existence such evils make possible, with the ultimate moral goods being the divine goods of displaying divine virtue. Indeed, as has been suggested throughout the Augustinian and Calvinist traditions in Christianity, one might understand God's primary goal in allowing evil, which according to many in these traditions is to "glorify himself", as primarily a matter of producing precisely these divine goods required by this greater-goods defense. When a Calvinist declares that God's chief aim is to glorify himself and that this is why there is evil, so that God would be even more glorified, we can, on this way of understanding it, take God's self-glorification to be simply a matter of God's self-display of divine virtue. The more perfect in quality and quantity of such displays, and the more aspects of God's character they reflect, the more the character of God is reflected in the world, which is a more-than-plausible interpretation of what it means for God to be glorified.

This greater-goods response, then, stands firmly in the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition (though it could well be used by theists who do not do so, including those who happen to fall outside the Christian tradition altogether). It is now important to add that according to both this tradition as well as much of the larger Christian tradition as a whole, God most glorifies himself through undertaking his plan of redemption, particularly through his Incarnation and Atonement,

in order to bring salvation to the world. Many medievals, in fact, found the Incarnation to be the very pinnacle and end-goal of creation itself. And Christians throughout all ages have found the value of God's redemption of humankind, here represented by the Atonement, to be second to none. But redemption, of course, requires that there be someone to be redeemed and something for them to be redeemed *from*. And this requires a *Fall*, or at least some kind of *fallen state*. God's great act of redemption logically requires that there be fallen people. And if, as a number of thinkers have suggested, the acts of God's redemption – specifically, as embodied in the Incarnation and Atonement – are the highest of goods then in order for the highest of goods to be realized in a world, such a world must be at some time or other a fallen one. That is, it must be a world of sin, evil, and death. This thought – that the Fall was necessary or justified because of the greater goodness of the redemption which required it – can be found throughout the history of the church and the sorts of defenses or theodicies which are based on such a thought have been known as *Felix Culpa* views after the "O felix culpa!/ O happy fault!" line in the famous hymn from the Latin liturgy. This hymn, the "Exultet", entered the liturgy somewhere between the fifth and seventh centuries and embodies an early expression of a Felix Culpa response to the Fall, one which finds many echoes before and after.[3]

Indeed, fitting nicely with the greater-goods defense we have been so far examining, Felix Culpa views have often defended the great value of the Incarnation and Atonement *precisely* in terms of their value as displays of the divine character. Along these lines, Melville Stewart (1993, 153 – see also his 1986) says, "[R]edemption allows God to demonstrate his love in a way that otherwise he could not". In firm agreement, Paul Helm (1993, 215) proclaims, "Finally, without the permission of moral evil, and the atonement of Christ, God's own character would not be fully manifest". Arthur Lovejoy (1948, 294), of this approach to the Fall, claims,

[3] Lovejoy (1948), in his essay on John Milton's appropriation of this tradition in *Paradise Lost*, notes that these ideas find expression or echoes early on in, for example, Ambrose, Augustine, Pope Leo I, and Gregory the Great.

"God himself *needed* a fallen race to evoke fully the divine attributes and powers." Alvin Plantinga (2004, 7), in his defense of a Felix Culpa theodicy, asks, "Could there be a display of love to rival this? More to the present purposes, could there be a good-making feature of a world to rival this?". Later in the same work (*op cit.*, 20), Plantinga adds that God may be so loving that he "would be willing to undergo the suffering involved in incarnation and atonement, even to save just one sinner…but that is compatible with its being more appropriate that God's magnificent action here save many, perhaps indefinitely many." Finally, Jesse Couenhaven finds such views in as early a figure as Augustine, of whom Couenhaven (2007, 294) claims, "Augustine's late theodicy is thus, basically, an argument that a world in which at least some relate to God as redeemer is beautiful and good in ways that an alternative world in which none relate to God as redeemer, and there is no evil, is not."

On this view, then, there would be tremendous goods missing were there no Fall and no evil. Higher order human goods would be missing, as would many divine goods. And preeminent among the missing, highly valuable divine goods, would be God's ultimate displays of love and self-sacrifice in his Incarnation and then Atonement. But notice that such an approach does not require us to accept an incompatibilist view of freedom. So long as the moral and divine goods are all intact, we have a sufficient justification for the existence of evil without relying on Libertarian free will. Recommending a Felix Culpa view to fellow determinists, Nick Trakakis (2006, 31) writes,

> On this view, the fall is either the only way or the most fitting way for us to be provided with the kind of disclosure of divine love made available in Christ's life, death and resurrection. In line with this view, the divine determinist may add, in response to Mackie's challenge [from evil], that a 'fallen' world enables God to reveal himself, and in particular his grace and mercy, more fully than in a world in which no-one needs renewal or salvation.

I would recommend, then, for all theists, this greater goods/glorifying God response to the problem of evil as an alternative to the free will response. And I would recommend it specifically to Christian theists, particularly as it is refined in the particularly Christian way proper to the Felix Culpa tradition.

To flesh out this view a bit more, we ought to see how it might incorporate perhaps the greatest apparent evil of all – that of eternal damnation. It may be natural for some to wonder here whether, due to the fact that the pinnacle of divine goods is found in God's redemptive activity, this means that universalism must be true – that is, that all persons will eventually be redeemed from sin and evil. After all, if evil only exists so that various virtues may be displayed and if the highest good for the sake of which we are fallen is so that God might redeem us, thus displaying his infinite love and self-sacrifice, why would anyone be left out of such a redemption – especially given that being left out is such a horrendous thing?

If we accept a Libertarian view of free will, I think it is much easier to reject universalism at this point. But suppose we do not. Suppose we are compatibilists. Must a compatibilist who takes on our proposed response to the problem of evil also accept universalism? The short answer is no. Defending this answer, however, may be a little more complicated. I will here only make some gestures towards such a defense. Suppose first that the traditional view of eternal damnation is true and that the damned exist forever in a state of brokenness and separation from God's redeemed order. In that case, the existence of this great evil – persons suffering eternal conscious damnation – may be justified by another divine good, that of displaying God's just wrath against sin (and those who commit it) and having this in eternal juxtaposition with his eternal display of just love and salvation towards the redeemed. To paraphrase Augustine, God is just in condemning people and loving and gracious in saving them. To save is an act of pure

grace and, perhaps, thus not morally required of God – or at least not universally so. And the divine good of displaying wrathful justice in damnation is also an important divine good alongside the divine good of displaying love in redemption. As Couenhoven (2007, 293) describes Augustine's views, the suggestion is "that the best explanation of the scriptural witness concerning God's character and behaviour is that the Fall and limited forms of punishment by themselves is not enough to show the full depth of God's justice and mercy; both the Fall and eternal punishment are required." On the other hand, if annihilationism is true and the damned are ultimately sentenced to non-existence rather than an eternal existence of low or negative value, then we have much less evil to deal with and the charge that damnation creates too much negative value in a world to possibly be justified seems to begin to loosen its grip. Either way, we have some kind of answer to give if we decide not to be universalists and still accept the divine goods response.

I believe that this view of the role of damnation in the divine goods response also has the resources to tackle a couple of potential objections that one might hear from time to time against views such as this. One is that Christ's suffering and death on the Cross was a sufficient and ultimate display of God's justice and wrath and that hence further display is not needed. I am not sure, however, that this is not question-begging or at least not unclear. Surely the event of the Cross is a "sufficient and ultimate display" in the sense that nothing need be added to it to legally atone for anyone's sins who might, by God's grace, place themselves in the body of Christ. Christ's suffering was enough to take the place of all and anyone to earn them redemption, should they receive such a gift. But here we are not concerned with legal or redemptive sufficiency or ultimacy. What we are concerned with is whether, to maximize the divine goods in the best, most justified way, this will require that some persons be ultimately eternally damned. In such a case, it is by no means clear that any world with the Atonement and no damnation will display God's wrath and judgment just as well as one with it. Indeed, it seems to me that the opposite is more

probably the case, the eternal juxtaposition of love and wrath displaying the two qualities in all their glory being much better than the display of only one of them.[4]

In response to Supralapsarian views which hold that God decided to glorify himself by creating creatures to be variously damned and redeemed, Diller (2008, 95) asks, seemingly rhetorically, whether a world could really have more value if it featured people who had eternally broken relationships with God than if it did not. Indeed, he (*op cit*., 92-93) also claims that it is plausible to see the Atonement as a mere means to the end of a right relationship with God and that *this* is its source of great value, a concern echoed by Bruce Reichenbach (1988, 81). Contra some Felix Culpa supporters, Diller rightly sees that (absent considerations from Libertarian freedom, perhaps) God could very well have established a right relationship with his creatures and even went through Incarnation *without* any Fall or any sin and evil.

So if Diller is right about this then the great goods of the Atonement and Incarnation do not require sin and evil since the Incarnation can occur without them and redemption without Atonement is all that is required to bring about the value possessed by the Atonement. After all, the Atonement has value precisely as that which brings a right relationship with God, and apart from this quality we can probably all agree that it would have little or no positive value. However, I think both Diller and Reichenbach are too quick here to think that this fact shows that the Atonement's value is merely *instrumental* value insofar as it brings salvation. It is important to remember that relational value and instrumental value do in fact come apart. Indeed, we can perfectly agree that the Atonement's value is largely grounded precisely in its bringing salvation. But that does not mean that this value is purely instrumental. It is important to look at the big picture – without sin or evil, important divine goods would be missing and it is *precisely because* a relationship with God is so immensely valuable that the Atonement as God's rescue of us into it

[4] Note that these kinds of considerations might also be used to effectively answer Reichenbach 80-81, where he questions whether it would really be more valuable to have a Fall and then redemption rather than have everyone simply begin in perfection.

is *also* so valuable a display of his sacrificial love. Without sin, there would definitely be displays of divine love, but it would not be like this and it would not be so valuable. And without eternal displays of divine wrath, it may not be so clear that things would really be more valuable. If the divine goods view we have been canvassing so far is correct and its assessment of the role of damnation in achieving the divine goods is also correct, then Diller's question ultimately has a relatively straightforward answer – the answer is a resounding yes, as paradoxical as that might initially sound. A world really *could* have more value if it featured people who had eternally broken relationships with God than if it did not. The Felix Culpa and divine good views seem to emerge, if not unscathed, then definitely still alive and kicking from Diller's attacks. So I think, ultimately, the defender of the doctrine of eternal damnation, whether in its traditional or more revised forms, can incorporate their views into the divine goods view without too much difficulty and hence reap from it a kind of defense or theodicy of Hell unattached to and unadorned with any presuppositions about the nature of free will.

So far, I think we can see that this divine goods view that I have been examining is powerful indeed. There are, however, some much more serious objections to it that have yet to be considered. I will answer the main one first, followed by two lesser objections. The first of these is that the persons whom God creates in a sinful, evil world are in fact being used merely as a *means* for God to achieve his greater divine goods – a seemingly bad and unloving action on the part of God. This Kantian point, of course, holds no weight if some sort of consequentialism were correct, or at least if it happened to be so for God. But suppose consequentialism is *not* correct and that it is in fact a fairly absolute matter that we should never treat a person as a mere means to our ends, no matter how good these ends may be. In that case, I still think we can get around this criticism. Consider, for example, ordinary punishment of criminals. This, at first glance, looks to be an example of treating people as means only – few, if any, really want to be punished after all. But if we are rejecting consequentialism of any sort, then it becomes unclear

what could justify such apparent violations of the criminals' autonomy. Here I think the most likely approach is to take a rather Kantian line in response to this rather Kantian problem. The idea is to take punishment to be precisely the way we *ought* to treat criminals if we are to treat them as ends in themselves. By doing evil, they in effect condone whatever punishment they deserve and make it a matter of justice and respect for them as rational beings to see to it that they are punished appropriately. A full Kantian retributive account of punishment will, of course, be more complicated, but this superficial gloss ought to be enough at this point to do the work for which it is needed.

Now let us put this Kantian view of punishment into play. We can now claim that, as far as our own voluntary sin goes, since it is precisely *voluntary* God is not using us as a mere means when he sets things up in the beginning so that we will end up committing some particular sin. After all, *we* have consented to it. And all the other evil we suffer can – perhaps at least in part – be seen as punitive in nature. Since it is suffered as a punishment for our own voluntary evil, such evil or suffering will not count as a violation of our autonomy on God's part.

One might wonder, however, how this deals with, for instance, the suffering of innocent children – are they not being used as mere means? But if Helm (1993, 211) and many other Reformed thinkers are right, then the Fall may make guilt for sin universal, even among children. If the doctrines of original sin and original guilt are taken on board – assuming the combination of the two can be adequately defended – then we have our answer. Indeed, more generally, as Plantinga (2004, 24) states, we could also potentially argue that much of the suffering that we – children or not – undergo might also be justifiably thought to respect our autonomy if I actually consent to it, if I would consent to it were I able to make the decision or be free of relevant ignorance, or perhaps even if I would consent to it were my disordered affections suitably repaired.

The second objection I wish to consider is that God is not just to judge us or punish us for our sins since it is God who ordains that we sin in the first place. Of course, much of the sting of this objection is already removed by my answer to the previous one – by voluntarily doing wrong, we thereby call judgment and punishment upon ourselves. And it is, after all, part of God's cosmic role to be the one who ensures that such punishment is paid out. Indeed, if determinism is true, then no punishment *could* be paid out without God's consent. So if someone deserves punishment and can only be punished if God determines it – if it would be unjust not to do so, since there is no one else to take over this task – then I can see little plausibility in the claim that God is not in fact obliged by justice to mete it out.

Now for the final objection. The final one, which may be found in Diller (2008, 96), and which one hears sometimes in theological circles in regards to theodicies in general, is that if a Felix Culpa or related response describes reality truly then "[w]e can no longer condemn evil and injustice as wholly antithetical to what is good." One might also find this sentiment expressed various other ways: "It would make evil good", "It would trivialize peoples' pain and suffering", "It would rid us of our reasons for preventing evil", and so on. But these sort of objections represent a significant misunderstanding of the view under consideration. As Stewart (1993, 146) insists, the Fall and evil are all *inherently* bad. They just so happen to also be *instrumentally* good. One mistake behind the kind of objection we are now considering is to fail to see this difference. That something is instrumentally good and that God is justified in allowing it for something greater does not render that thing any less bad in its own right. Indeed, such a cost ought to be seen as indeed costly and genuinely lamentable in its necessity. It ought not to make any of us any less vigilant against evil since we are not in God's position and morality (as well as God himself) still demands that we prevent evil. Indeed, our prevention of evil is precisely one of the higher order goods for which evil exists in the first place!

Given our discussion, what then should we say about the problem of evil? Ultimately, I find the free will response highly attractive. I am myself a Libertarian about free will and would gladly appeal to this view in defense of theism. However, I also find the view defended so far in this paper one worthy of even further defense and development. Moral goods, both human and divine, are natural components of a response to the problem of evil, particularly such great divine goods as those embodied in God's redemptive work on behalf of humankind. Such a response not only seems to do well against general evil and suffering but also against the potentially infinite sufferings of hell and eternal damnation. I most definitely have not fully deflected all possible moral criticism of such a response, nor have I even necessarily provided unanswerable replies to the objections I have addressed. What I *hope* I have done is to show that such a view is not completely out of the ball park in regards to plausibility and, indeed, that it is worth our consideration. If Libertarianism is true, as I think it is, perhaps the best idea would be to try to have the best of both worlds – to combine the free will response with the divine goods response canvassed here. Libertarian freedom could indeed do wonders in deflecting any remaining moral criticism from the divine goods view and the divine goods view could do the same for the free will response. If we then integrated some sort of soul-making view into this mix, that would truly be a response to the problem of evil that would be hard to beat. Not only would the various combined views be mutually reinforcing, but we would also be able to potentially successfully combine and weave together (at least on this particular topic) multiple theological traditions into one coherent whole – Felix Culpa traditions, divine glorification traditions, Augustinian and Calvinist traditions, free will traditions, Irenaean traditions, and so on. In doing so, we would be heeding the wisdom of the Teacher:

> Though one may be overpowered,
>
> two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.[5]

If nothing else excites the theist trying to find an adequate solution to the problem of evil, the prospects of such a combined, strengthened front should.

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[5] Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NIV).

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